

California's Oil and Water Quality Regulators Issue Stop Orders for Some Water Disposal Wells in Kern County

Review of Permits, Water Quality Testing Requested to Ensure No Threat to Public Health

SACRAMENTO – The Division of Oil, Gas, and Geothermal Resources (DOGGR) today issued orders to 7 oil production companies to immediately shut down 11 water disposal wells to avoid potential harm to a limited number of groundwater aquifers in Kern County. The order was issued after DOGGR discovered that the water disposal wells are located near protected sources of groundwater.

DOGGR, the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) and the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board (Central Valley Water Board) are working closely with the Department of Public Health. Plans will be developed to evaluate whether there has been any impact to water supplies. A near- and long-term plan for any contamination that is discovered will be implemented.

“While we do not have any direct evidence any drinking water has been affected, out of an abundance of caution we have shut these small number of disposal wells down and ordered the operators to provide information and conduct testing to ensure human and environmental health and safety is not at risk,” said Steve Bohlen, State Oil and Gas Supervisor and head of DOGGR. “We will work closely with the State and Regional Water Boards to analyze the data and testing results from the industry.”

DOGGR has primary authority under the federal Safe Drinking Water Act to regulate underground injection wells related to oil and gas operations in California. The law permits disposal of the usually brackish water produced in oil extraction operations into underground aquifers that either have poor water quality, that contain oil and gas deposits, or are not potential sources of water for drinking or other beneficial uses. Disposal is not allowed in aquifers that are currently used as sources of drinking water or that could reasonably be expected to supply drinking water in the future. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) can formally designate aquifers as appropriate for waste injection. The disposal permits suspended today may have allowed injection into aquifers that do not appear to have received the necessary designation from the U.S. EPA.

“The review and testing required as part of these orders will give regulators information necessary to evaluate the threat to the aquifers and nearby water supply wells,” said Jonathan Bishop, Chief Deputy Director at the State Water Board.

With the State Water Board, DOGGR is mapping the location and depth of each of the disposal wells in question and their proximity to water supply wells used for human, agricultural and industrial use. The water supply wells potentially affected are located primarily to the north, east and west of the city of Bakersfield.

Most of the homes and businesses in the area draw their primary water supplies from public water systems, which are required to adhere to rigorous water quality testing, including various chemical contaminants, on an ongoing basis. Contamination of this supply would have been discovered as part of that ongoing testing. However, the municipal system currently meets all drinking water standards.

Nonetheless, the state and regional water boards are taking additional measures to evaluate the potential impact to nearby supply wells and will contact owners of the wells as appropriate. In addition, the Central Valley Regional Board has ordered the operators of the injection wells to analyze

the quality of the water in the injection zones, and DOGGR has ordered the operators to analyze the quality of the fluids that were being injected.

Secretary of Cal/EPA Matt Rodriquez said, "While this represents only a small fraction of the waste injection wells in California, we need to ensure the safeguards are in place to protect public health and provide peace of mind to the public."

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